Design Resource

Traditional Toys of Kondapalli

The Craft of Wooden Toys

by
J. N. Somya
IDC, IIT Bombay

Source:
https://dsource.in/resource/traditional-toys-kondapalli

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Introduction

India has a glorious tradition of toys. The tradition of toys started from Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro which have thrown up a magnificent profusion of clay toys of considerable ingenuity, animals with moveable heads, monkeys that slide around a stick and the most skilful toy carts. Toys are torches, which guide children into adult life, for it is through them that they are imitated into the inner mysteries, traditions and faiths of the world they are to enter.

My tryst with traditional toys began in my childhood when I used to spend my summer vacations with my Grand-parents in Andhra Pradesh. Each visit included an essential visit to Lepakshi Emporium in the city which meant buying a new traditional toy to show off to friends back in Delhi; the toys which were so popular with other children and common in the show-cases of living rooms of relatives and friends in Andhra Pradesh.

Kondapalli, Nirmal and Etikoppaka toys are the most significant wooden toys made in Andhra Pradesh. I decided to study and document Kondapalli toys which are traditional wooden toys carved by artisans. This project gave me not only an opportunity to revisit memories of toys but also to answer questions that I never tried to answer before.

* http://crafts.indianetzone.com/toys.htm

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About Kondapalli

Kondapalli is an industrial town near Vijayawada city, Andhra Pradesh, India with nearly 38000 population covering an area of 1.5 sq kilometers. It is about 20 km by road from Vijayawada on National Highway 221 and on Hyderabad – Vijayawada railway line.

The word Kondapalli gets its name from the shepherd named 'Kondadu' who showed the site to King Kondaveedu Reddy and hence it was called Kondapalli. The town is known for two major things i.e. ancient 'Kondapalli Fort' and its locally-made toy craft Kondapalli bommalu (Kondapalli toys). 'Kondapalli Fort' of three storeys was built in this place during the region of King Anavema Reddy in 1360 A.D. It was however during the rule of the Qutab Shahis that Kondapalli gained paramount importance and fame as a hill fortress. The 37 Sultans re-christened it as Mustafanagar. Later, the British East India Company considered it a strategic location and a military school existed here till 1859 (as revealed by the historic records of Andhra Pradesh in general and Vijayawada in particular).

Kondapalli Fort.

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Kondapalli.

Kondapalli.

Kondapalli town from the hill.

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Kondapalli Toys

Kondapalli toys are famous for their lightweight, vibrant colours and age-old production techniques. Themed around mythology, rural life and animals, these toys exhibit joyous and realistic expressions. The art shows the strong influence of the Islamic style and the pointed nose of the human figures is reminiscent of the 17th century Rajasthani style.

The artisans who make these toys are known as *'Aryakshatriyas'*. It is said that these craftsmen migrated from Rajasthan to Kondapalli around the 16th century bringing with them the art of crafting toys. This 400-year old tradition has passed on from generation to generation with every member taking part in the toy-making activity in the *'Toy Colony'* of Kondapalli. There is also a reference to this group of people in the *"Brahmanda Purana"*. This community claims its origin in Muktharishi, who is said to have been endowed with skills in arts and crafts by Lord Shiva himself. These *chitrakaras* (craftsmen) claim that it was their ancestors who sculpted numerous sculptures like the *Garuda, Nandi, Simha* and the *Vahanas* in the many temples in Andhra Pradesh.

Over the years, the Kondapalli toy has become a collectable from a plaything. The shift ate into the repurchase market because, unlike children's toys, which tend to break, collectables require little replacement. An integral part of the Dusshera and Sankranthi celebrations is the *'Bommala Koluvu'* or *'Kollu'* when toys are collected and ceremoniously displayed and most children and women would vie to have the grandest and most elaborate collection. The artisans of Kondapalli would make the most business during these festivals, but these traditions are slowly vanishing and with them, artisans are forced to look at measures to cut costs and switch to enamel colours instead of natural dyes.

Though there was neglect of the interests and development of the Kondapalli artisans due to the advent of mechanized toys, the scenario has completely changed in recent years. The Government, Governments departments, certain institutions and organisations are giving a helping hand in developing this industry.

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The Craftsmen

"Craft is not meant to be enshrined in museums, showcased in heritage packaging. That would amount to burying it."

- Uzra Bilgrami, Dastkar

Most families learnt the craft of Kondapalli toys from their ancestors and it is been passed from generation to generation. In the olden days, Kondapalli artists received patronage from the local rulers. For years, these artisans were neglected due to the advent of mechanised toys and many artisans and their children gave up their profession to seek other lucrative jobs. Due to better returns for their hard work and efforts from Government and other organizations, more youth are taking to training and entering the trade now. Many of the craftsperson's children intend to continue with their hereditary craft.

Artisan S. Nageswara Rao with his son specialized in crafting Raja Rani toys with other toys and selling them through their shop in Kondapalli. Artisan V. Srinivas Rao learnt the art of painting toys from his wife who learnt the art from her father (families of her sisters also paint various toys in Kondapalli). They specialize in painting toys with natural colours, especially *Raja Rani* toys.

The family of artisan N. Janardhana Rao produces and sell different toys of Kondapalli.

The family of artisan involved in making toys.

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Family members of artisan V. Srinivas Rao painting the various toys.

Raja and Rani in painting process.

The artisan carves the various parts of the toys while his sons do the filing and finishing.

The artisan carves the various parts of the toys while his sons do the filing and finishing.

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Classified in terms of position/structure of hands.

Order of change in dressing style over the years in males.

Order of change in dressing style over the years in females.

Classified in terms of pairs.

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Tools and Raw Materials

Wood:

Kondapalli toys are made of wood available locally called Tella Poniki (White Sander wood and botanically called Jiuotia Rotteri Fromis).

The Kondapalli craftsmen use this particular wood because this wood is soft, lightweight and can be easily carved. The wood is brought by the craftsmen from the nearby forests of Gangineni, Adlapadu, Konduru, Chevuturu and Madhavaram. Most of the time, instead of cutting down the entire tree, they just cut the branches so that the tree develops the branches again and the wood is available for more time.

Locally available wood called Tella Poniki.

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Other Materials:

Several natural materials like *makku* (glueing paste of tamarind seed powder & saw dust), *sudda* (lime), *temma jiguru* (acacia gum) and natural dyes are used to finish the toys. Fevicol is also used nowadays instead of makku. The brushes used to colour the toys are very fine and sharp are made of goat hair.

The carving tools used are a drill, hammer, axe, *bahudara* (for carving), *aakrai* (file) and chisels for finer work.

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Making Process

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Selection of Wood, Cutting and Seasoning

Healthy and mature trees of 'Tella Poniki' that have reached a height of a minimum of 10–15 feet and 2-3 feet bark diameter are selected from the nearby forests of Kondapalli. The selected tree is cut/ chopped into the wood of manageable pieces. The freshly wood is usually heavy in weight. It is therefore allowed to dry in the sun for about 20days to a month. This is called seasoning. During this time the cut wood loses sufficient moisture and becomes light and soft, to the extent that one can cut through the wood with ease. This makes it suitable to carve interesting figures (i.e for artistic wood carving).

Proper seasoning of wood is very important. Wood not seasoned properly or for long enough becomes worm-infested and unusable for toy making. As such no external pest control measure is adopted. The pieces are kept on a wireframe over a bowl with burning sawdust to make it warm and easy to carve.

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Cutting, Carving, Filing and Joining

The dried wood is then cut into pieces according to the desired size of the toy to be made, by using an axe. Then bahudara is used to carve the desired shape of the toy. It is a tool used to carve the softwood to get the desired shape. This tool is unique in the production of Kondapalli *Bommalu*. The Kondapalli toys at all stages of carving are subjected to a slow process of heating on a wireframe to evaporate the moisture. The carved softwood is then filed using *aakrai* to give it a better shape and smooth finish.

Other body parts (hands, pots, musical instruments, etc.) are carved and heated separately before being joined to the main sculpted body by using a locally prepared adhesive called *temma jiguru* (acacia gum). It is the gum used for glueing, prepared as per traditional methods. Now fevicol is also being used to reduce costs. Thus the outer look of the toy is prepared.

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Finishing

The skeleton of the toy after carving has rough and square edges. These edges are rounded to give the toy a smooth body by applying *makku*. This gives the final shape to the toy. This also conceals all signs and joints.

Makku is made by boiling a mixture of finely ground powder of tamarind seeds and sawdust in water until it becomes a smooth paste. It is applied using a tool called *palapu chekka*. This tool is a thin and smooth piece that fits comfortably in one's hands, made by filling a cow's horn into a smooth oval-shaped device. The use of this tool is also a unique feature in the production process. Brown paper or newspaper or cloth is stuck on the cracked areas using maida solution reinforcing the strength of the toy. After it dries, it is smoothened with sandpaper.

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Pre-coating

When the makku dries completely, the toy with its smooth edges and all basic components resembles the final shape. Its initial finish is brought about by skillfully applying a coat of *sudda* (lime) mixed with *temma jiguru* through a brush.

All the tasks of the toy production until this stage are usually done by men in the family. Then the women of the family take over to paint the toy with brushes.

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Painting

The painting starts with colouring various body parts. For a few toys, wood primer is first applied before colouring. There are three kinds of paints being used - oil, vegetable dyes and enamel. Oil paints are used for regular toys, vegetable dyes for export quality toys and enamel paints on pieces created for special occasions. A coat of linseed oil is given to toys painted with vegetable colours to make them waterproof.

In earlier times, artisans used vegetable colours which involved a lengthy process for its extraction. Later on, chemical colours came into use, which was found to be dangerous if consumed accidentally and so their use was discontinued. These vegetable colours are prepared by the artisans themselves from locally available materials which are extracts of plants like *Karakkai, Moduga* etc.

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Products

Kondapalli toys in bright and vibrant colors portray and depict themes relating to spirituality and village life falling under any one or more of the following distinct categories namely:

Animals and Birds

Rural Life

Mythological Figures

Contemporary Designs

Paper Mache Doll

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Animals and Birds

The popular animal forms are cows and elephants, while swans, peacocks and sparrows are the usual forms in the birds' category.

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Ambari elephants, toddy tappers, *pallaki* bearers with a bride, a woman milking the cow, a simple hut with a woman cooking, men guarding are the common scenes sculpted by Kondapalli artisans.

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Traditional Bullock Cart

The bulls in India are used in fields for agriculture as well as transport in rural areas. The bulls are arranged to cart the bags full of grains from one place to another by farmers. In some places, bull races are conducted like horse races. The bull is worshipped as Nandi (Vahana of Lord Shiva) in Hindu mythology and bullock carts are decorated well during festivals.

The Bullock cart is one of the toys which has evolved in terms of its design through the years. Both traditional carts with bulls in flat pieces of wood and the simple support system and the contemporary cart are the favourite among the people.

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Rural Life

"The toys have a definite grammar of colour composition of their own and a reflection of native rural life of the Telugus."
- LANCO official

Kondapalli toys are centred around the different vocations common to rural life through a series of separate scenes and human figures.

"In India, the oldest toys belong to the 5000-year-old Harappan civilization. these toys were made natural materials like clay, wood and stone. they depicted ordinary men, women, animals, birds, fruits and vegetables as well as the important professionals who existed in those times - the potter, carpenter and farmer, among others. And these ancient toys are surprisingly similar to the handmade toys of a later date."
- Sushama Shetty

The set of 24 human figures called Village people set is sold since the time Kondapalli toys have been in existence. These toys still speak the professions of then villagers - fishermen, priests, tribal people, farmers, musicians, water bearers etc. These toys have a basic body structure with different elements (music instruments, tools and clothing).

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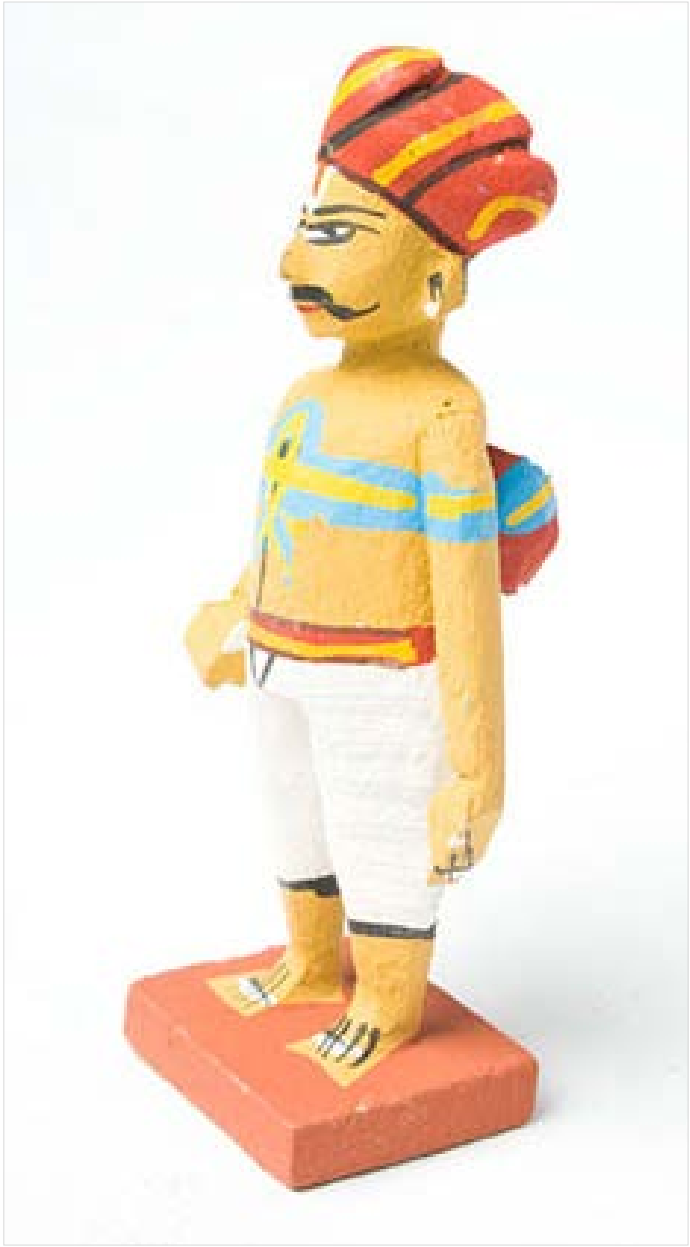

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Mythological Figures

The popular classical collection of mythological figures include events associated with the life of Lord Krishna, the Gitopadesa, Dasavatars (ten incarnations of Lord Vishnu), representations of Lord Ganesha, Lord Shiva and other gods of the Hindu pantheon. The mythological toys pose a great challenge, as they require skill in portraying half-human and half-animal god figures.

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Dastnatar (from left to right) in smallest me paint in natnl colour.

Dasavatar in bigger sizes painted in enamel paints.

Paritrãnãya Sãdhunãm, Vinãshãyashcha Dushkrutãm
Dharma Sansthãpanãthãya Sambhavãmi Yuge Yuge ll

To protect the good, destroy the wicked, establish Dharma or right conduct on earth, I shall be born from age to age (said by Lord Krishna while giving the Gita Updesh to Arjun during the war in Mahabharata).

Amongst the Trinity of Gods, that is, Brahmã, Vishnu and Mahesh; Vishnu who is known as the Preserver of the Universe, seeks from time to time to redeem the world and manifests his Divine Being into the life of man as an Avatãr (Incarnation) whenever evil threatens it. It is said that the ten incarnations represent the evolution of mankind.

The ten incarnations of Vishnu are:
Matsya (The fish)
Kurma (The tortoise)
Varãha (The boar)
Narasimha (The half-man, half-lion)
Vãmana (The dwarf man)
Parshurãm (The man with an axe)
Rãm (The moral man)
Krishnã (The philosophical man)
Balarãma / Buddhã* (The spiritual man)
Kalki (yet to manifest)

*Some texts replace Balarãma to add Buddhã, believing that Balarãma was the incarnation of the serpent (Ananta) on which Vishnu reclined.

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Contemporary Designs

Kondapalli toys are made using Contemporary design. Few category are as follows:

- Game of Chess.
- Key holders to be provided with hooks to hang things.
- Fruit/Vegetable seller.
- Raja Rani of different sizes (4 inches of 16 inches in height) painted with natural colours.
- Wall hanging of Raja Rani.

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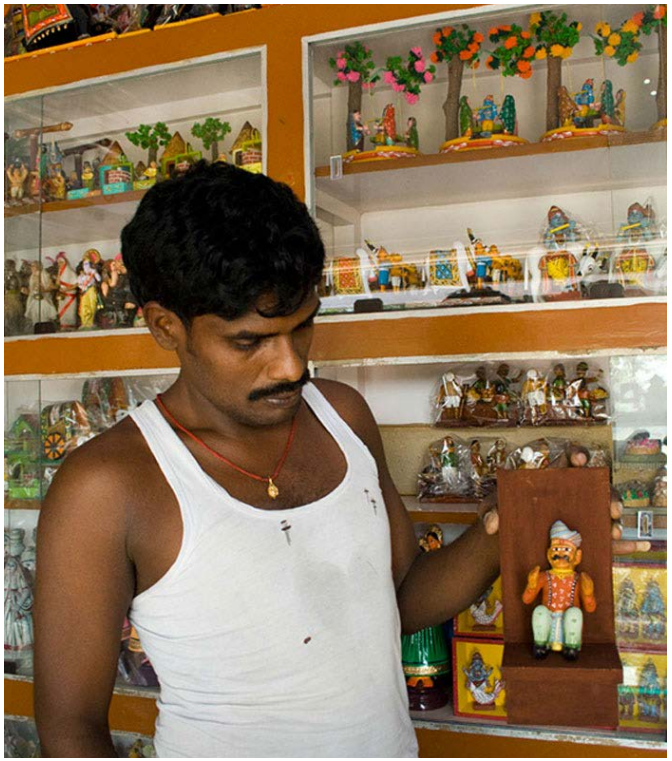

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Paper Mache Doll

One family in Kondapalli also makes the popular 'Dancing Doll' which originally comes from Thanjavur in Chennai. The family migrated from Thanjavur to Kondapalli a few years back and produces these dolls here in Kondapalli now.

These dolls are made from paper maché and moulds. There are moulds of different parts of the doll divided into two halves (front and back). The paper maché flat layers are rolled with the help of a pin in thin layers. The thin layers are stuck in these different moulds by pressing with hands taking the impression and shape. Extra material is cut and removed. The moulds are kept in sun to dry for some time. After the basic shape is dry enough, it is removed from the mould and the front-back halves are joined using fevicol. And then, these dolls are finished and pained part by part in bright natural colours to be assembled in one piece.

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Opportunities

Utility Items: As toys and other items of the household have disappeared from the living rooms these days, contemporary utility products can be designed especially in the area of stationery retaining the traditional look of Kondapalli toys.

Dynamic Toys: A mechanical feature can be worked out in Tella Poniki wood to make Kondapalli toys as dynamic toys where various body parts and accessories are movable and can be attached or detached.

Role-playing Games: The lost culture of imagination and mock play in children can be revived by these traditional toys. Children can be encouraged to play role-playing games with Kondapalli toys.

Story-telling: Kondapalli toys represent ritualistic and symbolic deities based on Hindu mythological characters. Folktales and mythological stories can be narrated through these toys.

Website and a Video: A website can be designed showcasing visual documentation of the toys promoting the craft and opening an avenue for artisans to reach and sell more.

Dasavatar is a medium of story-telling through mythological stories.

Kondapalli toys can be made dynamic by making working joints like other toys.

To promote and protect the traditional art form for 400years, LANCO through its Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programme has launched an initiative called LIGHT (Lanco Institute of General Humanitarian Trust), in place since 2002. LIGHT has enabled about 140 Kondapalli artisan families to upgrade the quality of production and marketing of Kondapalli toys, thus keeping alive the age-old cottage industry. 80% of the beneficiaries are from SC/ST community.* Under the joint initiative of the Government and Lanco, a common facility centre for the artisans is being set up where all the orders for the Kondaplli toys would be processed and each craftsperson has been given a life insurance policy up to Rs 1 lakh. The craft community has been divided into 14 groups under the cluster group development programme.

NGOs have also been roped in to help. 'Dastakar' (Andhra Pradesh) was one of the first to encourage the artisans to work with an improved colour palette. Much later, Crafts Council (Andhra Pradesh) conducted workshops and there was a gradual return to traditional vegetable dyes. NIFT, Hyderabad introduced a product line more suited to the contemporary milieu and corporate gift items like boxes, penknives, key holders, table clocks, pins and pen

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holders.

LANCO - Lanco Infratech Ltd
NIFT - National Institute of Fashion Technology

A delegation from Kondapalli visited the World Telugu Conference held in Singapore in 2002 opening up new vistas for their products.

Issues like cracks appearing in the toys and termite-attack were solved with the help of professionals by LIGHT. Methods were adapted to make the wood of the Tella Poniki tree stronger by way of seasoning. Through Andhra Pradesh Forest Academy, efforts are on to increase the area under cultivation of these trees.

Through the efforts of LIGHT and CII (Confederation of Indian Industry), Kondapalli Bommalu created only in the Kondapalli district of Andhra Pradesh, are now marked with Geographical Indication (GI), a unique recognition given to products native to a specific place on earth.

A Kondapalli Toys Development Forum comprising Kondapalli Toys Artisans Mutually Aided Co-operative, Crafts Council (Andhra Pradesh), CII, Andhra Pradesh Handicrafts Development Council, Vishwakarma Art gallery and LIGHT has been constituted to formulate strategies to promote these toys.

Now with an organized approach and support from Government and private players, artisans have been able to market their products to fetch better prices.

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